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## Language and Gender

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Dr. Mary Talbot, in the Department of Language and Culture at Sunderland University in England, is interested in the relationships among language, gender, and power and in how these play out in advertising and related media. In this selection from her 1998 text *Language and Gender: An Introduction*, she first reviews some early language and gender studies. This research reveals that in some languages, Japanese for instance, sex differentiation is absolute—women use one sound or word and men use another. In others, differences are in frequency, that is, in how often particular words or language patterns are used. Talbot then distinguishes between biologically determined sex and the sociological idea of gender and notes the pitfalls of treating sex and gender as the same thing. Language use, she stresses, is part of gender identity—something we learn along with our other cultural behaviors.

Gender is an important division in all societies. It is of enormous significance to human beings. Being born male or female has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in the world, how the world treats us. This includes the language we use, and the language used about us. I want . . . to make you more conscious of the social category of gender, of the divisions made on the basis of it and, not least, of the part language plays in establishing and sustaining these divisions. In linguistics and language learning, the label 'language and gender' sometimes causes a bit of confusion because people naturally think of gender as a grammatical category. . . . Gender, in the sense I am using it here, is a social category, not a grammatical one.

### LINGUISTIC SEX DIFFERENTIATION

The earliest work on men, women and language attended to 'sex differentiation'. Studies of such differences were carried out by Europeans (and other 'Westerners') with an interest in anthropology. They have tended to concentrate on phonological and lexicogrammatical 'exotica' (sound patterns, words and structures). A great deal of this kind of study has focused on the existence of different pronouns or affixes specific for



men and women, whether as speakers, spoken to or spoken about. Sex differentiation of this kind is uncommon in languages of European origin. The pronoun systems of Germanic languages—such as English and Danish—only distinguish sex in third person singular reference (*he/him, she/her* or *it*). That is, when one individual is speaking to a second one about a third, the sex of the third person is specified. The pronoun systems of Romance languages—such as French, Italian and Spanish—are similar, except that they mark sex in the third person *plural* (*ils/elles*, etc.) as well. Colloquial Arabic also has sex-marking in the second person singular (*you*); so that in addressing a person as *you*, the pronoun you use will depend on whether that person is male (*?inta*) or female (*?inti*). (The symbol ? represents a glottal stop.)

Other languages have very different pronoun systems. The Japanese one is complicated by the existence of distinct levels of formality and the need to take into account the status of the person you are talking to in deciding which level to use. There is a range of different words for the first person pronoun, *I*, for instance. There are formal pronouns which can be used by both women and men: *watashi* and the highly formal *watakushi*. Less formally, *atashi* is used only by women, *boku* traditionally only by men (there is also another form, *ore*, available to men if they want to play up their masculinity). Choice of pronoun depends here on the sex of the speaker not the addressee. That is, if you are a woman you must use the 'female' pronoun form and if you are a man you must choose from the 'male' forms. Japan does appear to be undergoing change. Girls in Japanese high schools say that they use the first-person pronoun *boku*, because if they use *atashi* they cannot compete with the boys (Jugaku 1979, cited in Okamoto 1995: 314). Feminists have been reported using another form, *boke*, to refer to themselves (Romaine 1994: 111).

In some traditional, tribal societies, men and women have a whole range of different vocabularies that they use (while presumably understanding 'male' and 'female' forms but not using both). An extreme example of this phenomenon was in the language used by the Carib Indians (who inhabited what is now Dominica, in the Lesser Antilles). When explorers from Europe first encountered these people, they thought the women and the men were speaking distinct languages. A European writer-traveller in the seventeenth century had this to say about them:

the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men. (Rochefort, cited in Jespersen 1922: 237)

This linguistic situation is more likely in stable, conservative cultures, where male and female social roles are not flexible. However, a contemporary tribal people in Brazil, the Karajá—whose language has



TABLE 36.1 Differences in Male and Female Speech in Karajá

MALE SPEECH	FEMALE SPEECH	PORTUGUESE	ENGLISH
heto	hetoku		house
ōtu	kotu		turtle
bisileta	bisikreta	bicicleta	bicycle
nobiotxu	nobikutxu	domingo	Sunday

Source: Fortune and Fortune 1987: 476.

more differences between male and female speech than any other language—are currently coping with rapid and profound cultural changes affecting every aspect of their society. In Karajá speech, sex of speaker is marked phonologically. There are systematic sound differences between male and female forms of words, even occurring in loan words from Portuguese. There are some examples in table 36.1. Notice the absence of /k/ and /ku/ in male speech.

Traditionally, the Karajá speakers have very clearly defined social roles for women and men. The distinct male and female forms contribute to marking these two domains, a central aspect of Karajá tribal identity. Since young people are now learning to read and write in their mother-tongue of Karajá, these distinct forms will be retained. As a consequence, they will be less likely to lose their sense of cultural identity in the process of assimilation into the larger, Portuguese-speaking Brazilian society than if they had to acquire literacy through Portuguese.

Sex differences in language of the kind we have been considering were grouped together as *sex-exclusive* differentiation in the 1970s. A distinction between *sex-exclusive* and *sex-preferential* differentiation—first suggested by an American linguist, Ann Bodine—became popular for labelling two different kinds of feature under investigation. Unlike *sex-exclusive* differences, *sex-preferential* differences are not absolute; they are matters of degree. While *sex-exclusive* differentiation is fairly uncommon in languages of European origin, the same cannot be said of *sex-preferential* differentiation. [It has been argued, for instance, that] women use forms of language that are closer to the prestige 'Standard' than men do (that is, speak more 'correctly'), and . . . that [they] use a cooperative style in conversation while men use a style based on competitiveness.

Both *sex-exclusive* and *sex-preferential* differences are highly culture-specific. Acquiring them is an important part of learning how to behave as 'proper' men and women in a particular culture. Failure to acquire appropriate forms and their usage can have serious, even devastating, consequences for the individuals concerned. Gretchen Fortune, an American linguist in Brazil who co-produced the original writing system which is still used by the Karajá, has told of one young Karajá speaker whose use of women's forms was not corrected by his parents (Fortune 1995). This individual's collision with the linguistic norms of his community meant that he became a



type of 'misfit' and source of ridicule within the community. For him, as a 'misfit', Portuguese provided a new identity and a kind of liberation.

Linguistic sex differentiation can become a location of social struggle within a society, not just the struggle of one individual. Japanese men's and women's forms are ceasing to be sex exclusive, that is, forms used exclusively by one sex.

## SEX VERSUS GENDER

This brings me to the distinction between sex and gender. It was first articulated in detail by a British feminist in the early seventies (Oakley 1972). It does not exist in all languages—it's absent from French, Norwegian and Danish, for example—but for us, as language scholars, it is an important distinction.

Sex is biologically founded. It is a matter of genes, gonads and hormones. Female ova contain the female sex chromosome X; a male sperm contains either a female X chromosome or a male Y chromosome. Ultimately whether you have ended up male or female is all down to whether your father gave you an X or a Y. It is these chromosomes which determine the development of the gonads (embryonic sex glands) into either ovaries or testes. At around eight weeks old, the gonads of a fetus with one X and one Y chromosome start to produce the 'male' hormone testosterone, after which the fetus begins to develop male genitalia. Without the production of this hormone, the fetus continues as normal; that is, it carries on developing as a female. Sex is essentially binary. One is either male or female (of course, hermaphrodites confuse the picture; I'll come to that in the next section).

Gender by contrast is socially constructed; it is learned. People acquire characteristics which are perceived as masculine and feminine. In everyday language, it makes sense to talk of a 'masculine' woman or a 'feminine' man. Unlike sex, gender is not binary; we can talk about one man being more masculine (or feminine) than another. This contrast is reflected in the grammar of English. Grammatically we can have *masculine*, *more masculine*, *most masculine* but not *male*, *\*maler*, *\*malest* (the asterisk is marking the ungrammatical forms, a convention in linguistics). People are 'gendered' and actively involved in the process of their own gendering. . . .

From the above it is clear that what have been called sex-exclusive and sex-preferential differentiations are in fact ways of *doing gender*. They are part of behaving as 'proper' men and women in particular cultures. If they were genuinely matters of biological sex, they would not display the extraordinary diversity that they do. They would be the same everywhere.

So it would be misleading, and not at all helpful, to conflate sex and gender. Accounts differ, however, over the extent to which differences

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between the sexes are biologically determined or learned. For instance, there is a good deal of evidence indicating that men tend to be more aggressive than women. There are many more men than women convicted of violent crime. The presence of higher levels of testosterone in men than in women is often used to account for this difference (testosterone is known as the male hormone and is crucial in the development of the male fetus, but it is found in women as well).

The research evidence is far from being conclusive, however. There seems to be a connection between high testosterone levels and aggression, but it certainly is not possible to claim a definite *causal* link between them. That is, we cannot say for sure that testosterone makes people aggressive. After all, there is a lot of research evidence documenting boys' tendency to be more aggressive than girls, even at pre-school age; different levels of aggression between boys and girls cannot be put down to hormone differences, since children's hormone levels are negligible. In fact, there is some research to suggest that it might be the other way around: a person's aggressiveness might cause an increase in their testosterone level. We have a chicken-and-egg situation, in fact. And the problem doesn't end there. What do we mean by aggression anyway? The term is notoriously imprecise (see, for example, the Australian feminist Lynne Segal's account of it being used synonymously with 'dominance' (1994: 182)). It can be used to refer to very different phenomena, from assertiveness in seminars to serial killing.

So, is men's tendency for greater aggression a biological (that is, sexual) characteristic, or is it an aspect of masculine gender and therefore socially constructed? Or is it perhaps both? Well, it is probably best to concede that people's behavior patterns come about in an interplay of biology and social practices, so that ultimately it is not really possible to separate the biological from the social. For the record, a causal link between testosterone and aggression has been established in rats and mice, not in humans or other primates. In some primate species, but not all, greater levels of aggression have been found among males than among females. Even where this is the case, there is no need for a biological explanation (Bem 1993: 34-5). As Segal observes:

The biological alone is . . . never wholly determining of experience and behavior. For example, all people must eat, but what we eat, how, when and where we eat, the phenomena of vegetarianism, dieting, dietary rules, obesity, anorexia, indeed any human practice or problem surrounding eating cannot even be adequately conceived of, let alone understood, only by talk of biological propensities. (1994: 186)

In making claims about the relation between sex and gender, then, we need to be careful. When gender is mapped on to sex, as it frequently is, there is an implicit assumption that socially determined differences between women and men are natural and inevitable. The confusion of sex and gender has political underpinnings: it often accompanies a



reassertion of traditional family roles, or justifications for male privileges. Consider a few examples. Here are some comments I have heard fairly recently. They probably sound all too familiar:

Women aren't allowed to do what's natural these days. Normal women want to have babies, they want to stay at home, but they can't.

Well, I suppose the boys do dominate in class. Oh, they hog the computers, naturally. No, the girls just aren't interested.

You women always complain. So now it's 'competitive work environments', is it? You get what you want and you're never bloody satisfied. Always whingeing about something. 'Competitive work environments', 'harassment in the workplace'—what a load of crap! Not up to the job, more like.

If you can't take the heat, sweetheart, go back to kitchen.

And so on. The last one was intended as a witty put-down, of course. (See Spender (1995) for Australian equivalents of the remark about boys in classrooms.) When the distinction between sex and gender is erased, restricted possibilities open to women and girls may be excused as biologically necessary and received ideas about differences in male and female capacities, needs and desires left unchallenged.

So claiming that sex and gender are essentially the same is a conservative argument. As Ann Oakley has observed, 'in situations of social change, biological explanations may assume the role of an ethical code akin in moral persuasiveness to religion' (1982: 93). An extreme, and hence comical, expression of this in operation was in a magazine article in the late seventies dealing with a perceived threat to humanity in enormous numbers of women choosing the independence of a working wage over domesticity and dependency. The article was headed 'Ambition, stress, power, work—IS IT ALL TURNING WOMEN INTO MEN?' In it a 'top endocrinologist and Professor of Medicine' appealed to women to 'recognize their limits before it's too late' (cited in Kramarae 1981: v-vi). Too late for what, I wonder?

I wish it was always so easy to laugh at, though. There is a popular and influential field of research devoted to reducing human behavior to biology. Sociobiology, as it is known, tries to establish a genetic basis for behavior. A recent contribution to this field claims to provide evidence that black Americans' relatively poor educational achievement is genetically based (Murray and Herrnstein 1994); in other words, that black people are genetically inferior. It is rather startling to find similar biological fundamentalism among feminists. Consider, for example, the American feminist Andrea Dworkin's dogmatic and frighteningly reductive assertion that 'violence is male and the male is the penis' (1979: 515).

Claims about direct biological influences on language are just as contentious. There has been a huge amount of research attempting to establish sex-related differences in brain capacity, a lot of it in recent years by

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sociobiologists. It is politically highly sensitive. Disputed claims about cognitive differences are that women are born to be better with language than men, and men are innately better than women with visual and spatial things. There are indeed some fairly well-documented differences:

1. Girls statistically go through the stages of language development a little earlier than boys.
2. Girls are less likely to have language-related disturbances, such as stuttering and reading difficulties.
3. The right and left hemispheres of the brains of girls and women tend to be less specialized in function than in boys and men (less lateralized). This means that the speech centres are not so exclusively established in the left hemisphere; women process speech on the right side more than men do. The upshot of this is that if a woman's left hemisphere is injured (through a stroke, for example) she will probably show less impairment of speech than a man would.

Difference 3 is often used to account for 1 and 2. There is a major problem with this, however. We have a chicken-and-egg situation again. How can we assume that the difference in lateralization is innate? New-born babies don't fit the pattern at all. In fact, some researchers have discovered that *boys'* brains tend to be less lateralized. Environmental influence seems a far more plausible way of accounting for the differences. There is plenty of evidence indicating that boys and girls are spoken to differently. Apparently we talk to baby girls more, for instance. Might this not stimulate greater facility with language? It seems highly likely. To cut a long story short, after vast amounts of research trying to prove fundamental biological differences in the mental capacities of women and men, results have been inconclusive. What intrigues me is that people want to find such differences at all. As British linguist Deborah Cameron has observed, 'studies of "difference" are not just disinterested quests for the truth, but in an unequal society inevitably have a political dimension' (Coates and Cameron 1988: 5-6).

In dealing with learned kinds of activity, such as linguistic interaction, we can only speak with any certainty about gendered behavior. Linguistic interaction is obviously behavior which has been learned, and there is little point in trying to account for it by talking about innate qualities. In societies with sex-exclusive differences in language use, choice from among a range of lexicogrammatical options is part of gender performance. The word 'choice' is perhaps not the right one, since the forms for use by women and men are enforced by prescriptive rule. They can be compared with prescriptive rules in English such as 'two negatives make a positive', 'never end a sentence with a preposition', or 'don't say "him and me", say "he and I"'. Speakers are corrected, one way or another, if they produce inappropriate forms. The consequences of transgressing the rules are probably more dire than they would be for an



English speaker these days, however. Occasionally there are exceptions when speakers are not corrected and suffer as a result, as we know from Fortune's research among the Karajá in Brazil.

Gender, then, is not biological but psycho-social; it should always be considered in the context of social relations between people.

### SEX AND GENDER AS TROUBLESOME DICHOTOMIES

A recent collection on language and gender research opens with the observation that 'Just as we rarely question our ability to breathe, so we rarely question the habit of dividing human beings into two categories: females and males' (Bergvall, Bing and Freed 1996: 1). The authors of this first chapter, American linguists Janet Bing and Victoria Bergvall, go on to consider how human beings need to impose categories and boundaries on experience in order to understand it. This is something very familiar to linguists. Boundaries in our experiences can be quite fuzzy and vague; language puts things into clear-cut categories, imposing boundaries, limits and divisions on reality. Bing and Bergvall observe, for example, that we have the distinct categories of 'day' and 'night', but the actual boundaries between them are indistinct. We cannot identify precisely when it stops being daytime and becomes night. Day and night are bipolar categories that language imposes; the reality is a continuum. Similarly, sociolinguists interested in dialect continua are used to dealing with indistinct boundaries. It can be very difficult to determine where one variety of a dialect or language ends and another begins. The point Bing and Bergvall are making is that a lot of experience is best described as a continuum and bipolar categories are not always accurate.

I have already observed that gender is a continuum. It makes sense to talk about degrees of masculinity and femininity. We can say that one person is more feminine than another. But surely male and female are clear-cut categories, aren't they? Well, usually yes, but not always. It turns out that sex is also a continuum. In the last section I presented the basic determinants of fetal sexual development. Sometimes things happen differently, however. For instance, a fetus with X and Y chromosomes may not receive its crucial dose of the 'male' hormone testosterone at eight weeks. It may not be enough. Or if enough, it may be at the wrong time. 'Mistakes' like these mean intersexed development of the fetus. Not all individuals are born male or female. Some are born as both, some as neither, and some are indeterminate. According to figures cited by Bing and Bergvall, for every 30,000 births there is one intersexed infant. 'Although the birth of intersexed individuals is not rare,' as they observe, 'it is unmentionable, even in tabloids that regularly report such outrageous topics as copulation with extraterrestrials and the

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reappearance of Elvis.' In industrialized societies, the binary distinction between male and female is medically enforced. Exceptions are 'corrected', surgically and with hormone treatment. Since this is the case, it should be no surprise that physicians acknowledge that sex as well as gender is socially constructed (Bing and Bergvall 1996: 8-9).

In some writing on language and gender there is a tendency to treat the psycho-social categories of masculine and feminine as bipolar. This is particularly true of work on distinct interactional styles of men and women. . . . Such studies put essentialism out through the front door, only to let it in again at the back. That is to say, they do away with biological essentialism, just to replace it with a kind of social essentialism, which is just as bad. . . . Bing and Bergvall pessimistically predict that, despite our increasing awareness of the problems of gender polarization and stereotyping, 'there will probably be no decline in the number of students who begin their term-paper research with the question, "How is the language of men and women different?"' Such questions strengthen deeply held certainties that mere facts cannot dislodge' (1996: 6). I sincerely hope they are mistaken.

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